

India Now: Don't miss it!

ARTHUR J PAIS

If you think you have seen the best of actress Nandita Das in films like Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and *Earth* and Mani Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* (*A Peck On The Cheek*), do yourself a favor. See this luminous actress as the woman wronged over and over again by a male-dominated, caste-ridden society in a village in the Marathi film *Maati-Maay*.

An utterly low-budget film, which marks Chitra Palekar's debut as a director, is called *A Grave-Keeper's Tale* in the festival circuit. Based on story by Mahasweta Devi, one of India's most recognized and immensely powerful chronicler of exploitation and the courageous response to it, the film is disturbing and stirring. But it is also ultimately life-affirming. One of the stronger films shown at last year's Toronto International Film Festival, it has since traveled to a number of film festivals including the one in London.

"It is a small-budget film but it is big when it comes to its themes," says Palekar. "It is not an abstract art film. People have come out of the theaters with tears but also a smile on their face, for having seen a touching film. I am overwhelmed by the response to it."

Palekar's film is part of the India Now Festival organized by the

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■ A Cry In The Dark documents an extraordinary struggle in Manipur



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Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film, in association with the Indo-American Arts Council. There are nine feature films and two short films in the festival running through April 30; many of them are New York premieres.

The selection, which includes the surprise box-office hit *Omkara*, seeks to capture 'the astonishing range of fiction and documentary styles and genres evident in India,' the organizers say. The films also pay tribute to the resilience of its makers; some of the directors also produced or co-produced the films, and they made them against many odds.

Palekar, for one, borrowed money, apart from investing her own, and made the film for just about \$300,000.

"You act in these films because your heart and your soul asks you do so," says Das, who will be introducing it to the audiences in New York. "We know there is no money in them but at the end of the day, you are glad you have worked in them."

Several directors including Rahul Dholakia — director of *Parzania*, a film based on the 2002 Gujarat riots — are arriving in New York to discuss their films, and the challenges they faced in making them and having them released.

The festival marks another milestone for the IAAC, the brainchild of Aroon Shivdasani, whose annual film festival has unveiled such outstanding films as Deepa Mehta's *Water* and Mira Nair's *The Namesake*.

"Anything Aroon and IAAC does, they do with great care," says Mehta, referring to Shivdasani, the president and executive director of the IAAC. "My film started its auspicious journey with the IAAC film festival. I was blown away by the response it received at the festival," Mehta adds.

Mehta's Oscar-nominated film was shown by the IAAC much before it opened in theaters in Canada and became an instant art-house hit. Author Salman Rushdie praised it so much that it became a must-see film for discerning viewers. Hundreds of film lovers also got a chance to see for the first time Mira Nair's *The Namesake*, adapted from the novel of the same by Jhumpa Lahiri, much before it was released commercially and went on to become a solid hit, earning \$11 million in nine weeks. It is still continuing to draw audiences in over 300 theaters. At the IAAC showing of the film, Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk and Booker Prize winner Kiran Desai joined Rushdie, another Booker winner, in applauding it.

And now the IAAC has joined hands with MoMA in offering some of the most interesting and riveting films made in the last two-and-a-half years. The films show that while India is one of the world's fastest growing nations, its film industry is also one of the most dynamic industries that produces not only the musical extravaganzas but also films that look deep into the souls of its characters.

"It is not always easy to make the kind of films I make and yet I forge ahead, and a lot has to do with the fact that my films go to many important film festivals and are released in art houses in countries such as France," says writer and director Buddhadeb Dasgupta, whose *Chased By Dreams* was a highlight of the Premieres series at MoMA in 2004.

He returns with *Kaalpurush*, also known as *Memories In The Mist* (2005), an intense work about a young man (a compelling Rahul Bose) haunted by memories of his father (with an unforgettable performance by Mithun



■ A still from A Cry In The Dark



■ A still from Shoonya

Chakraborty).

Dasgupta is considered by many critics in India and abroad as a successor to Satyajit Ray. His films, at once subtle and yet emotionally moving, continue to inspire many younger film-makers. Dasgupta has been making films for over 25 years. "With each film, my passion to make another film grows," the soft-spoken filmmaker says.

The festival also brings *Parzania*, which takes a small real life incident and turns it into a powerful cinema that unfolds against the background of the communal riots in Gujarat which killed over one thousand people and rendered thousands homeless and scarred for life.

Given the controversy the film had whipped up, exhibitors in Gujarat shunned it but its maker Rahul Dholakia has emerged as one of the most courageous Indian filmmakers, whose cinematic talent is also being recognized by film festivals across the world.

Anjan Dutt, whose delightful Bengali satire *The Bong Connection* (2006) closes the exhibition, is also one of the more admired of the moviemakers in the country.

Then there are two Bollywood hits. The low budget Dibakar Banerjee's Capra-esque comedy *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2006) was able to get back its investment — just about half a million dollars — within two weeks of release.

And Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006), a richly operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, which had some of Bollywood's more popular and versatile artists — including Saif Ali Khan, Ajay Devgan, Kareena Kapoor, Bipasha Basu and Konkona Sen Sharma — and which surprised many by its popular run in India. The film, which shocked some with its raw dialogue and brutality and which cost about \$2.5 million, became a bigger hit in the United Kingdom and North America. It grossed a strong \$3 million outside India. At the India Now festival, you will have a chance to revisit the film on the big screen, and share your thoughts after the screening with non-South Asian audiences, many of who would have seen it for the first time.

Bhardwaj, whose previous Shakespearean saga *Maqbool* was a hit at film festivals but did not win the vote of audiences either in India or abroad, says he has been more than gratified by the success of *Omkara*. Its success means more filmmakers would come forward to make movies different from the commercial run, he adds.

Also included in the festival is Arindam Mitra's *Shoonya* (2006) that follows a star cricket player into the seedy world of professional sports gambling.

And then there is the shocking and controversial documentary by Haobam Paban Kumar *A Cry in the Dark* (2006) which captures the astonishing acts of defiance and brutality in Manipur — which is constantly monitored by the army — following the rape and murder of a young woman in custody. The woman was suspected of working undercover for secessionists. When the bureaucracy and politicians try to look the other way, women from all walks of life, young and old, join the protests.

"People have no idea what has been happening in Manipur for many many years," says Kumar who had shown the film at the Toronto International Film Festival last year. "People know of the violence, brutality, and sadness in Kashmir. To many, this film is an eye-opener."

He describes the nonviolent protest led by women as an example of Gandhi's nonviolent movement.

Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dor* (2006) is one of those films which received good attention in the media and got many rave reviews but had hardly any commercial success in India. In America, it is now available on DVD, having had hardly any theatrical exposure. But seeing the gorgeously-lensed film on the big screen would be a very different experience from watching it on a small screen.

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Among the many pleasures of watching the films at the India Now festival is that of seeing some well-known stars and actors playing roles that one doesn't expect them to take up. Saif Ali Khan playing the cunning and selfish rogue in *Omkara* is one example.

Also, people who do not get an opportunity to see regional films would have a chance to discover actors who are a treasure-house of talent. We have known for a long time that Soumitra Chatterjee is one of India's finest actors. His work in Satyajit Ray's films, especially in *Apur Sansar*, is part of film history. If you have wondered where he has been, watch out for him in *Bong Connection*.

Written and directed by Anjan Dutt and featuring Shayan Munshi, Raima Sen, Parambrata Chatterjee and Victor Banerjee, the film follows the parallel stories of two young men who have difficulty adjusting to life and love in a new country: one a charismatic Indian musician from New York who moves to Kolkata to discover his cultural roots, and the other a conservative but ambitious Bengali computer technician who seizes a job opportunity in Houston.

Dutt, who is also an actor, singer-songwriter, and journalist, has been praised for making a seemingly light but a thought-provoking film on the Indian Diaspora which stands apart from many Bollywood films such as *Pardes*, which are often caricatures of Indian expat experience.

He has also said he has offered homage to Ray by using — like Ray did in his films — traditional and Western music. He also cast Soumitra Chatterjee as a dying patriarch as another tribute to Ray. The film is in Bengali with English subtitles. It will be introduced by Dutt and some of his actors.

For Los Angeles-based writer and filmmaker Rahul Dholakia, making *Parzania* was worth taking the risk, even if it meant many people would be disturbed by his provocative but poignant film. His film revolves around a Parsi family he knew whose 13-year-old son disappeared during the 2002 riots in which over 1,000 people were killed.

One of last year's best-received films, *Parzania* could not find exhibitors and distributors in Gujarat, though people in the state could have seen on video and in multiplexes in neighboring states. Gujarat refuses to screen it, citing fears of violent protests. According to *The New York Times*, the chairman of a local multiplex said he would agree only if the Hindu rightwing outfit Bajrang Dal promised not to stage demonstrations.

Reviewers have hailed Dholakia for making not only a powerful statement against fundamentalist extremism, but also filling the gripping film with strong performances by Sarika and Naseerudin Shah as the boy's parents.

The film is being screened April 26, 8 pm. Zeenat, an independent and gutsy woman from the mountains of Himachal Pradesh learns that her husband is charged in Saudi Arabia of the death of another Indian man. She embarks on a journey across the deserts of Rajasthan to seek the forgiveness of the only one who can pardon him: the widow Meera.

Zeenat, a Muslim, finds in Meera a troubled person. Her father-in-law has reduced her to a servant. Worse, he is making plans for her future that could humiliate her all through her life. Writer and director Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dor*, released in 2006, does not have the standard Bollywood stars. But who wants big names when Kukunoor can coax good performances from his artists including Ayesha Takia, Shreyas Talpade and Gul Panag? The Hindi



■ Omkara



■ Parzania



■ Printed Rainbow



■ Bong Connection

film is 124 minutes long and will be shown April 28 at 2 pm.

Shoonya (Zero Zone), is written and directed by Arindam Mitra. With Kay Kay Menon, Seema Biswas, Naseerudin Shah.

Mitra's debut feature, the film is inspired by T S Eliot's *The Murder in the Cathedral*. With themes of temptation, treason, and honor, it revolves around a star cricketer (Kay Kay) who is lured into fixing his team's matches. But succumbing to the temptation was easy, he finds out, as the law, and then his conscience, close in on him when a scandal breaks out.

The Hindi film, which is 100 minutes long, is being screened April 28, 8:30 pm.

In *Kalpurnush (Memories In The Mist)*, the veteran writer and director Buddhadeb Dasgupta explores more than a difficult relationship. He also asks questions as to what filial love really is — and whether a man who discovers his adored child is not really his can continue loving her. The film features Rahul Bose, Sameera Reddy (who gives a good performance, obliterating her image as a sex kitten from Bollywood) and Mithun Chakraborty.

An intimate portrait of a father, his son, and the women in their lives, *Memories In The Mist* is a rather slow-moving film, but once it gets hold of your imagination — say about 15 minutes after it starts — you don't feel anymore that it is flowing gently.

Rahul Bose, described by *Time Magazine* as 'the superstar of Indian arthouse cinema,' plays a mild-mannered clerk coping with his troubled career, his wife's sudden celebrity status, and memories of his father, who continues to exert a powerful influence many years after their estrangement.

"As in many of my films, particularly *Tale Of A Naughty Girl* and *Chased By Dreams*, the past crosses the present in mysterious ways," Dasgupta says.

He adds that his father who was in his eighties had told him once that there were

a few things he wanted to discuss with him. "We had a very good relationship but he passed away before he could talk to me about the things which were on his mind," Dasgupta said in a chat at the Toronto International Film Festival two years ago. "It was then I got the idea to make a film about the unspoken things in our lives."

The 120 minute Bengali film, which has been shown at events like the Berlin International Film Festival, will be shown April 25, 5:45 pm, and April 29, 4 pm.

Some of Bollywood's most popular character actors including Anupam Kher and Boman Irani have a blast of time in *Khosla Ka Ghosla*. The 2006 film directed by Dibankar Banerjee tells the story of a middle-class family man from Delhi (Kher) who sinks his life savings into a suburban plot to build his dream house. But he discovers he has been swindled by a land shark (Irani). Banerjee says he wanted to make a shaggy (under)dog story. While the film is about how the neurotic patriarch and his dysfunctional family — shrewish wife, shallow daughter, disdainful older son, good-for-nothing younger son — somehow manage to turn the tables on the scam artist and his goons, Banerjee has also made time for couple of song and dance sequences, one featuring a feisty tune sung by Kailash Kher. April 25, 8:15 pm and April 29, 1:15 pm.

In 2004, Thangiam Manorama, a woman from a village in Manipur, was arrested and reportedly raped and killed in custody of the security forces. She was suspected of working with secessionists who have been fighting the central government for over a decade. The circumstances of her death and its subsequent cover-up sparked widespread outrage and a popular uprising against the sweeping powers the army enjoys, thanks to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. Haobam Paban Kumar, a native of Manipur who lives in Kolkata, captures in *A Cry in the Dark*, the

resistance in the face of overwhelming military force, acts of brutality and also the unflappable courage of unarmed protesters — many of them women. The army officers seem to have no fear of international human rights activists, journalists, and cameramen.

In Manipuri and English, the 56 minute film has also traveled to many festivals including the one in Toronto last year. The film will be preceded by Santana Issar's short film *Bare* in which the filmmaker uses home-movie footage and recorded telephone conversations to reach out to her alcoholic father. Screenings April 27, and April 28, 4:30 pm.

Maati Maay (A Grave-Keeper's Tale), Chitra Palekar's debut film, features Nandita Das, Kshitij Gavande, and Atul Kulkarni. Widely admired for her performances on screen and on the Marathi avant-garde stage, Palekar has adapted the Bengali short story *Baayen (Witch)* by Mahasweta Devi.

A young woman (Das), torn between familial and lower-caste duties and her maternal instincts, abandons her sacred responsibility as the caretaker of a children's graveyard. Following a tragic event, word spreads that the nursing mother has become an evil spirit and villagers banish her to a life of poverty and isolation. Even her husband cannot rise up to her defense. Their baby cannot visit the mother.

The story unfolds like a literary mystery when a 13-year-old (played superbly by the non-professional Gavande) boy is strangely drawn to her.

The 98 minute Marathi film will be preceded by *Printed Rainbow* which is directed and animated by Gitanjali Rao. Winner of three prizes at the Cannes Film Festival, it revolves around a lonely old woman who dreams of traveling the magical worlds printed on her precious collection of matchboxes. April 28, 6:15 pm; April 30, 5:30 pm.